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OO RUEHAST RUEHBI RUEHLH RUEHPW
DE RUEHCI #0177 1641330
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O P 121330Z JUN 08
FM AMCONSUL KOLKATA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2032
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
RUEHGO/AMEMBASSY RANGOON 0436
RUEHCN/AMCONSUL CHENGDU 0138
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RUEIDN/DNI WASHINGTON DC
RHHMUNA/USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA 2483

UNCLAS KOLKATA 000177

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [MARR](#) [KCRM](#) [ASEC](#) [CASC](#) [IN](#)
SUBJECT: WEST BENGAL ALERTS THE INDIAN ARMY FOLLOWING GORKHA
AGITATIONS; TOURISTS FLEE DARJEELING

REF: KOLKATA 0066

¶1. (SBU) On June 12, the West Bengal government put local Indian Army units on alert to possibly control Gorkha and Bengali agitations in Siliguri and Darjeeling district, and adjacent areas in northern West Bengal. Darjeeling District Magistrate Rajesh Pandey told Post that the army may be required to go on a "flag march" to stop the disturbances. The latest round of violence in the area began on June 8 when the Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha (GJMM) clashed with local Bengalis and were beaten by the police in Siliguri. The GJMM seeks a separate Gorkhaland state for ethnic Nepalis to be carved out of the predominantly Bengali West Bengal (reftel). In response to the police beatings, the GJMM called an indefinite "bandh" or general strike from June 10 shutting down all businesses and government offices. The strike created panic among thousands of tourists who visit the mountainous region in large numbers. Over 10,000 foreign and Indian tourists have fled the Darjeeling area in the last two days. On July 11 some tourist buses were blocked by GJMM supporters and were pelted with rocks. However also that day, the bandh was relaxed temporarily to enable movement of food and other necessities into Darjeeling and to allow tourists to leave. Post has issued a Department-approved warden message advising Americans to avoid Darjeeling and the disturbed areas.

¶2. (U) On June 11, the situation became further inflamed when Bengali organizations, including the Jana Jagaran Mancha (JJM), Aamra Bangali and Bangla Bhasa O Bangla Bachao Committee (BBBBC), in nearby Siliguri launched a two-day roadblock of the main road into the Darjeeling district to protest the GJMM's actions. The Bengali groups are trying to prevent supplies going to the Darjeeling hills to pressure the GJMM to end its agitations.

¶3. (SBU) Comment: The latest GJMM violence reflects a disturbing escalation, with the demand for a Gorkha state becoming an ethnic clash between Gorkhas and Bengalis. This conflict has surprised the state government as following the earlier April demonstrations, local officials told ConGen that they expected the GJMM to remain quiet during this time of the region's important tourism season. However, GJMM has shown little concern for the crippling financial impact that its violent demonstrations are having on the Darjeeling tourist industry, evidently reflecting its willingness to raise the stakes in its demand for Gorkhaland statehood.

JARDINE